



BOOK REVIEW

A Half-Century of Indian Higher Education: Essays by Philip G. Altbach; Edited by Pawan Agarwal; Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2012; 628 pages.

Philip Altbach's collection of articles has been released at a very opportune time for India's higher education sector which sees itself grappling with the same issues that he touches upon repeatedly in his book.

At the heart of Altbach's guidance for higher education lies nearly half a century of diligent pursuit of issues that plague the sector in India, starting way back in the mid-1960s. In a sense, the book works as a commentary on the evolution of higher education in India from the early years after independence. Besides India, Altbach's panoramic view of higher education derives from his experiences engaging with a diverse spread of universities from the world over, including the globally renowned Stanford and Harvard universities, State University of New York as well as universities in developing country environments such as University of Bombay and Peking University. At the same time, he has also closely associated with Indian policy planners, evident by the foreword of the book authored by Planning Commission member, Dr. Narendra Jadhav and words of admiration expressed for his work by the Union Minister of Human Resource Development, Kapil Sibal. Altbach's work is thereby a rich amalgamation of independent academic thinking complemented by a deep understanding of the structural constraints of policy making in India.

Given his persistent coverage of the higher education sector right from the early years after Indian independence and at a time when policy makers had just begun to express their vision for higher education, one would seek to know how far his recommendations have come to be reflected in India's education policy. A broad observation of the book's compendium of 34 articles suggests a fair alignment with Indian policy, notwithstanding some crucial departures. As revealed in the first few articles, where Altbach's recommendations and India's education policy concur is in the adoption of the Western form of education as an integral part of the larger plan for modernisation. Altbach has later reflected that while he believes India has made significant

strides, the speed with which it has modernised its higher education system is much too slow compared to many other developments such as India's integration with the global economy. He cites occasions where there was opportunity for reform, when the reports of the Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commissions made significant recommendations, but that the extent of implementation has been far from satisfactory.

The book's articles reflect deep admiration for the high level of academic freedom that the country's educational and political system has nurtured and this is one dimension that Altbach believes where India scores distinctly higher than China. This is not to imply that pressures due to oversight of administrative power, political interference, and ethnic sensibilities are not strong, but that broadly Indian scholars are able to publish in newspapers and academic journals without the fear of censorship.

The phenomenon of "massification" of higher education, describing the tremendous expansion in access, has been repeatedly touched upon in the book. Altbach's views on the subject appear to have undergone a steady transformation over time. While sceptical about the implications of massification in his early articles of the 1960s and 1970s, he seems to have become more tolerant of this in recent times. In the more current articles, he tends to cite the Planning Commission's target for expanding higher education enrolments to 25% and compares India with the Chinese success in quickly ramping up enrolments. But even with this perceptive change of heart, he continues to emphasise his perpetual concern that single-minded focus on expansions driven by political and profit motives would reduce the quality of education delivered. One gathers that he would be more inclined to support an expansion plan formulated with a purposeful and integrated approach, a situation which he feels is a far cry from reality today, given the mushrooming of institutions of higher education in the country.

There are also some dimensions of India's higher education policy that he vehemently opposes. He has consistently advocated a differentiated academic system by separating elite universities that are structured to produce world class research, from other universities which are primarily designed with the objective to enable a greater number of people to have access to higher education. Unlike India, China has diligently followed his suggested path and currently has many more universities waiting for global recognition. India, on the other hand, has many proposals in the pipeline for potentially large universities (such as Vedanta). Altbach believes that setting them up in

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relatively underdeveloped locations would curtail their growth even before they have begun to function. World renowned universities like California — Berkeley and University of Michigan are successful partly because they are connected to major urban centres. Finally, he is a vocal critique of excessive control, especially such that could potentially compromise on merit, the bedrock of all world-class education systems.

What comes across as particularly striking throughout the articles is Altbach's understanding of the element of "Indianness" in the higher education system, reflective of his deep involvement with the country's universities and colleges. His articles give detailed narratives of the evolution of student politics, influence of teachers' associations and the power-games played out between education departments and universities. However, the section on which this reviewer differs from the author is where he talks about the limited creativity in Indian academic life and attributes it to Hindu intellectual traditions which "rely on narrow scholarship". In the understanding of this reviewer, the Hindu tradition has a rich diversity of scriptural foundations and the tradition recognises the relevance of a multiplicity of philosophical interpretations.

One of the facets of Altbach's writings is his ability to make an objective analysis of issues, perhaps a product of his panoramic view acquired by engaging with higher education the world over. For instance, he identifies how the process of knowledge creation and dissemination have come to be controlled by the West, by virtue of Western nations being a base to major journals and book publishing companies. In a specific article on neo-colonialism he opines on how book subsidy collaborations between Western nations and India have contributed to embedding Western thoughts and ideals among the Indian intellectual class. He also cautions the Indian government against completely opening up to "internationalisation" by blindly encouraging foreign education players to set up base in India without creating an appropriate regulatory framework. Altbach's elucidates his views: "A truly open door permits pests as well as welcome guests to enter." He arrives at this suggestion based on a concrete analysis of the experiences of countries such as China, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Israel who exercised fairly discrete regulatory models to invite foreign participation in their higher education sector.

This reviewer's most favoured section is the one that deals with his comparative analysis of the two major higher

education systems that he refers to as the "two gigantic peripheries": China and India. As the term suggests, while he recognises and credits the achievements of the two nations, his articles on the subject published over the period 1993–2009 reflect the belief that the West is far from dethroned from its position at the centre of the world knowledge system. As expected, between the two nations, he identifies China to be more favourably placed in many respects and especially so in its bid to emerge as a "research superpower". His analysis is particularly insightful in throwing light on the reasons why China has emerged as the big brother, although it lagged behind India in higher education enrolments till as recently as 1991. Policy, and to some extent good implementation, is quite clearly the differentiating factor. The question that then emerges is why is India's democracy not able to implement the same policies that are paying rich dividends for China? While he touches upon some of the reasons in his articles, he often concludes that given the existing political and academic environment, India is not likely to see significant reform in the near future.

In summary, Philip Altbach's collection of articles is a useful reference book for anyone who seeks a holistic understanding of the evolution of Indian higher education from a historical perspective. There is a lot to gain from his perspectives for policy makers, administrators, educators and even general readers who are concerned about India's higher education. The book emphasises that while there is substantial need for increasing investment in Indian higher education, this alone would not suffice. What is equally necessary is a set of structural reforms to strengthen the country's university system.

Since this is a collection of articles that have been reproduced as is, there is a fair amount of repetition of concepts and insights across each set of articles broadly organised into eight sections. The reader is therefore advised to read a few articles from each section and then take a topic wise decision on what to read further.

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